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**Humanism, the Humanities and Technology**

# **DRAW LIKE A BUILDER, BUILD LIKE A WRITER**

*And the crack is in the detail*

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*Context*– **Introduction**

	<b>Gateway Project Games</b>
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	<b>Go South Go Kent</b>
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	<b>The Tanks Roll In</b>
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*Analysis*– **Narrative and Structure**– **History**– **Symbol and Ritual**

	<b>Sinclair's Not Dead</b>
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	<b>Bee In The Box</b>
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	<b>Life A User's Manual</b>
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*Synthesis*– **Quality in Numbers**– **Wittgenstein Oneandahalf**

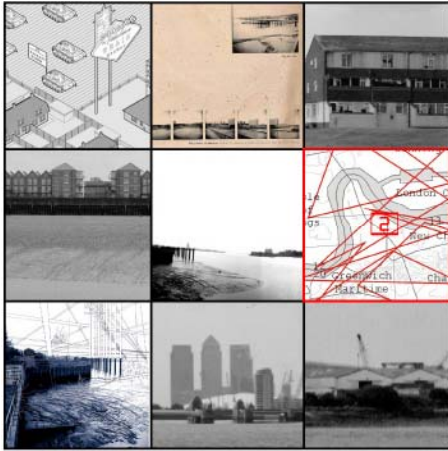
	<b>Theatre Of The Everyday</b>
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	<b>Mies' Slice</b>
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	<b>Big Knuckles Manipulator</b>
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*Summary**Notes*

1-0-0

**CONTEXT**

1-1-0

**Introduction**

As the inevitable building by numbers ensues, London's Thames Gateway becomes one of many playgrounds for bar charting enthusiasts. Houses measured by the thousands and little clues as to where it is, that ghost in the machine, what they are, the structures of everyday contemporary life, and who's life it is anyway.

Fernand Braudel, Georges Perec, Jorge Luis Borges, amongst others, are employed to examine just how Wittgensteins radiators find their ways into Barratts South East catalogue. They supply the container for Dickensian content with Sinclairesque detail, while late Jan Turnovski's epic lunacy will help to once and for all allay widespread popular fears that Wittgenstein 1 and 2 may add up to one-and-a-half, simple as that.

Never has the ideal of treating technology involved with building as an intellectual discipline been further removed from any notion of genius, loci or otherwise; housing policy housing, building policy building. Against the backdrop of mass housing and landmark buildings with little space or time for anything in between, five years of studio work with diploma students at the University of Greenwich, Vienna University of Technology and University Innsbruck, concerned themselves with the structural narrative of the Thames Gateway.

This paper, as well as the projects presented through it, is a premature attempt at anchoring buildings on the words they are built on, technology on the sentence structure of its description, assembly instructions written in the most specific of dialects. It describes techniques, suggesting an architecture read backwards, sideways, horizontal and in parallel, free associative sequence, thus discussing issues of site, context, detail and conceptual adhesion.

It also poses questions: concerning locality, history, ritual, conceptualisation and intellectual detachment. Above all, in view of the sheer relentlessness of commercially driven urban expansion, questions of soul and character, of design sustainability in terms of creating space to accommodate viable structures social, cultural, narrative. Allowing history to continue, creating place worth telling tales about.

### 1-1-1

#### GATEWAY PROJECT GAMES

“Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea ... my most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things ... in this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard. ...and the shape of the letters on my fathers tombstone ... I had the odd idea he was a square stout, dark man, with curly black hair.”<sup>1</sup>

This is the beginning of Dickens's, “Great Expectations”, located on the Hoo Peninsula at a geographical centre of the Thames Gateway. This is the meeting place of Pip from the smithy and Magwitch from a prison hulk in Egypt Bay. The Thames Estuary is a big brown mass of river. The Thames Gateway is a mass gathering of brownfield sites, an area splaying out along the estuary, running forty miles from Greenwich and twenty miles across from Rochester to Southend.

It is plotted as the London expansion zone. It is not designed - another laissez-faire affaire, London's traditional approach to planning. It is a landscape ripe with benchmarks, quantitative questions - how many houses, how much flooding. It is a relief valve for the pressure of housing in London. Sir Peter Hall's 'London 2000'<sup>2</sup> proposed satellites towns growing to the east. Not the carpeted or suburbanized edge of London but centres of 20, 30, 50,000 Milton Keynes meets tidal reach communities, and sustainable? The buzz word which seemingly means visited by buses. 160,000 new houses by 2016, or heads will roll. Amongst the quantities, how to find the quality – perhaps an understanding of context.



*Fig.1: Marsh Country - Michael de Wolfe 2004*

## 1-1-2 GO SOUTH GO KENT

Five years of tapping into the deeply uncreative underbelly of south London and the North Kent rust belt has drawn new and old stories racing across young minds. Thames Gateway North, Essex, has been and is happening, Kentish Man's (Medway to London) Thames Gateway South, is starting to come. Postgraduate architecture students from Greenwich, Innsbruck and Vienna Universities seem hungry for new readings and willing to play new games. Much of the south side is a forgotten territory but provides rich pickings for the few, such as Dickens looking for material, and the major house builders who have long ago bought up both the brown and green fields. In the search for quality let's play across it with context, analysis and synthesis from the students projects.

So to Game No1 : Using George Perec's spatial chapter system, the knights tour, from his 'Life, A Users Manual'<sup>3</sup>, it is rolled out for ordering the mudlarks collections as part of Jaclyn Holmes 2005 project. The knights tour, every square on the chess board visited once, was Perec's system for moving around the apartment block of his story and his chapters. In Jaclyn's project the mudlarks (river scavengers and collectors) reapply the system to navigate the brownfield shoreside sites of the Gateway. They travel back and forth on the tides on the search for lost and found objects, and building their collections of rubber ducks?

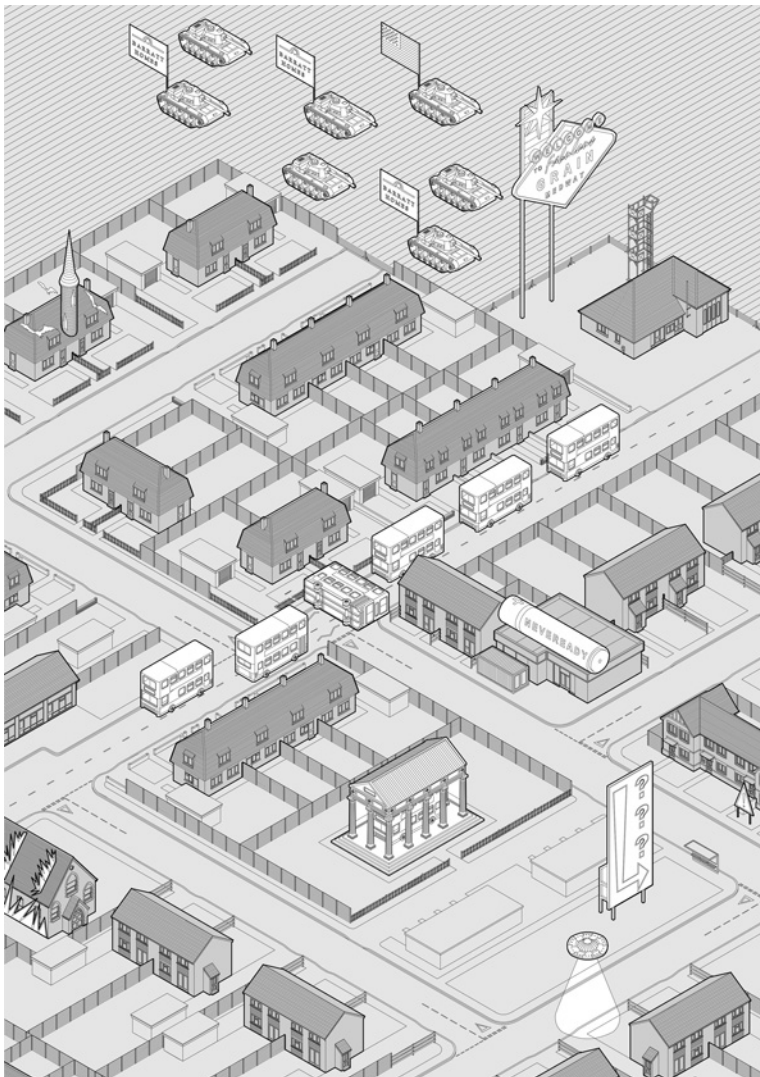


*Fig.2: With Perec on the way to Paris, Mudlark Collecting Analysis – Jaclyn Holmes 2006*

### 1-1-3

#### THE TANKS ROLL IN

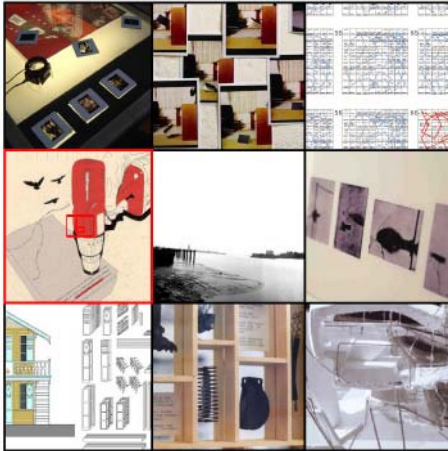
The Isle of Grain is an end point, the end of the line (until the next barrier is built) an isolated breeding ground for poets with its Martello Tower and bus turning space. A place for curlews, convicts, contraband and expectations. The 50s and 60s had seen the arrival of a workforce and early batch housing but now the big boys, Barratts, Bellways and Wimpeys are carpet bombing and rolling in across the marshland, the hills don't take kindly to their layouts - too much modification. They see hills as a problem rather than a challenge. Accountants control the layouts 'the gentlemen in suits are playing their games,' says Billy Childish, the Medway poet. The resulting common denominator, batched noddly-land, mushrooming out of the marsh is crying out for qualitative testing. It's Benjamin's work of art in the era of mechanical reproduction without the magic, social commitment or the art. How do we rate its ordering devices and textural surfaces, narrative games and production systems? How to create the depth and resonance for a perfect score.



*Fig.3: Isle Of Grain Studies – Tim Wolfe-Murray 2005*

2-0-0

# ANALYSIS





## 2-1-0

**Narrative and Structure**

*“..in chess, not only is the present configuration of pieces on the board all that matters to the newcomer to the game (no further insight would be gained from knowing how the pieces came to be arranged in this way), but any number of items could be substituted for the pieces on the board (a button for the king) because what constitutes the game’s viability is the differential relationship between the pieces and not their intrinsic value” (Ferdinand de Saussure)<sup>4</sup>*

Fundamentally, the presented body of work sets out to synthesise quality. A quality not to be found in the basic provision of numbers of units, housing or otherwise, and accompanying high-profile world classness of landmark structures. Quality inherent in the place, the location, cultural, social, historic context of the Thames Gateway in its vast totality. Quality also defined as the ‘whole minus the sum of parts’, the “bit extra’, the properties grown out of interaction, difference, divergence; latent, unpurposed, non-linear.

In this context, conventional means of surveying prove insufficient: where do we look for the intangible and undefined? Books, for one, and obviously so. Historic references, local knowledge and cultural heritage, but there is more: a to-be-built structure of the local narrative, perhaps, a system of architectural classification and organisation with inherent rightness, appropriateness to place.

By means of abstraction through the use of text, concepts, the humanities, we begin to determine the Gateway’s language in a structural sense: the relationships between its elements, not their intrinsic values. We become collectors: of texts, artefacts, measurable and ultimately buildable patterns of day-to-day practice. In parallel, observers of narrative flow: linear or not, multi-directional, in reverse, paradox at times.

In any pursuit of structure, there is an element of gaming. Claude Levi-Straus frequently refers to game theory in his structural anthropology, while Saussure uses the above chess analogy to investigate a ‘combinatory nature of locations in pure *spatium*, which is infinitely deeper than the real expanse of the chess board or the imaginary extent of each figure’<sup>5</sup>.

The studio context of the presented work is significant, or rather signifying as it establishes itself as a device in its own right, independent and not linearly attributable to individuals within the group. Partially or completely detached from their points of reference, structural fragments are toyed with, re-configured, passed around and treated with disdain. The discourse becomes the ‘structural object’, it is real but does not correspond to existing actualities, and ideal but not identical to an abstract idea; befitting, in its third-stateness, its qualitative original purpose.

## 2-2-0

**History**

The French historian Fernand Braudel (1902 – 1985) introduces the concept of the long span, ‘la longue duree’, in response to the traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century convention of a ‘histoire evenmentielle’, a history of events. By focusing on an understanding of ‘how patterns of practice and series of discourses are

articulated', he introduces a spatial, structural property of history, one which we take liberty to adapt, wholesale, into our own reading of the Gateway.

Braudel offers a historical reading unafraid of complexity, resistant to simplification and willing to entertain a historical narrative carried by 'conjecture and structure', nuances, small scale events determining the course of history. He views history as an open system, where 'each subsystem would be dependent on its environment.' This reading is 'structural in orientation, being derived from the way many events are organised over different time periods'.<sup>7</sup> His history, therefore, is not based on a linear narrative, but embedded within a plurality of views.

While Braudel is referred to by John Lechte as 'the first truly postmodern historian', his approach contributes to our own by introducing horizontal thought. He instills a consumption of historical context as basis for design which is of a conspicuous nature: referential, but non-dialectical. Ironic, comical, recklessly aestheticising; thought that operates according to its own norms and concepts. Borrowing, wildly, from John Lechte's description of Gilles Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche: 'needing the past like a warrior who needs a worthy enemy to show his prowess.'<sup>6</sup>

2-3-0

### **Symbol and Ritual**

For Gilles Deleuze, the first criterion of structuralism is the establishment of the symbolic as a third order besides the real and the imaginary. The symbol is purveyor of meaning, relational and conceived by a combination of elements which, in themselves, are not signifying.<sup>7</sup>

In the same way Braudel's horizontality leads to a philosophy of history, rather than recording history itself, our horizontal exploitation of the local narrative, in denying hierarchical ordering, leads to a Gateway meta-architecture, projects generated by themselves, often dissolving dialectical boundaries and blurring analysis and synthesis, record and proposal, fact and fiction.

Symbols and meaning within the narrative are multi-faceted, not subject to an objective order of importance. Where Braudel speaks of *conjectures and structure*<sup>8</sup>, patterns of practice, we find ourselves operating within a meshwork of rituals, performed in parallel and viewed from a multitude of perspectives. Use of the biographic and anecdotal leads to the introduction of the latent, the un-purposed, as the ordering principle, the master plan, the dark-matter-adhesive within the Gateway; horizontal analysis leading to a classification system of rituals of a different kind.

Applied as an architectural concept, horizontality is seen to be bypassing the vertical axis of numbers and hierarchies. We are perceiving a horizontal spread of values and concepts, the Deleuzian 'body without organs', self-classifying fields of intellectual densities, produced in connective synthesis from parallel strands of generative narrative.

## 2-0-1

### SINCLAIR'S NOT DEAD

The Games enrich as travel stories dominate and proliferate. Canterbury tales pass down the A2 via Morris's Red House. Victoria travels by train to her pier on Grain at the confluence of Medway and Thames, as Dickens passes she looks the other way. Someone is telling porkies: where did Kenny Knory the modern day pirate stash the gold and is that the M25 junction, where he committed his road rage murder. 'Falstaff's' Cooling Castle becomes home of music maestro with slap and tickle jazz parties. Concrete boots at Ebbsfleet. We need a metal manipulator to synthesize this story, a Graham Swift's Last Orders meets Trainspotting.

The psycho-graphic games wander out of Hackney. Greenwich University hosts a conference on Iain Sinclair – is the writer dead? Sinclair is heading for Hastings beyond the gateway but in 'Dining on Stones' he has the archetypal Gateway character Jimmy Seed. This artist developer, has a groove worn into the arm of his Volvo's door from the pound coins needed for the QE bridge toll, suggesting a mistress on the South Coast.

Projects fabricate and tell the stories, the mass house builder's roll across the psycho-geographic and the everyday, smoothing out the variables with their property games formula. Both the developers and the writers have been fabricating and constructing. Speculations have flowed and twisted out of the narrative text. The Bishop of Rochester asks for the soul of the Gateway, Judith Amrit the Thames Gateway chief executive says it can be found in the trees, Sinclair sees it sold to the devil.



*Fig.4: Am I Ian Sinclair from Sinclair Is Not Dead – Tim Wolfe-Murray 2004*

## 2-0-2

### BEE IN THE BOX

Collecting and displaying – the bee in the box - starts with a Benjamin influenced text and moves to stamps and insects into boxes then onto bread tags, in suitcases– suitcases that may have been for travelling and tourism but are now for hording and collecting. Game no5 by Michael de Wolfe, has an everyday, almost healthy obsession for collecting. but how to analyse amongst the collections of found objects.

The classification of the evidence is researched and passes through long and short systems from the Dewsey, to the Borges' Chinese Encyclopedia's animals classification.

Situated in the drained marshes of Thamesmead, but ready for their reflooding Michael de Wolfe's project extends from the flying walkways of the 60s, to embrace the recent arrival of the un-elevated brick boxes, batched Plan As. Recording the tidal levels in the construction fabricated around his collections are the well travelled plastic ducks. The drawings and sections of the building unfold from the collection drawers. We just need young Mr Delarge, filmed on Thamesmead for Kubrick's Clockwork Orange, to emerge holding a butterfly.



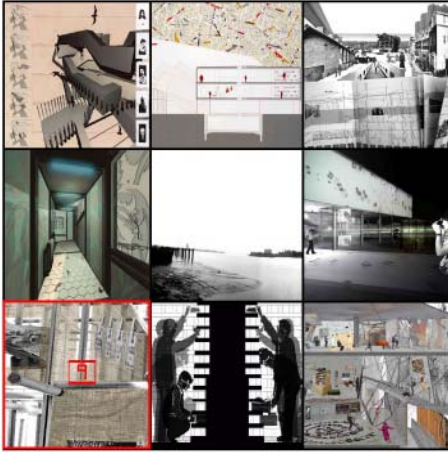
Fig.5: The Box The Bee from MDEW collection – *Michael De Wolfe* 2004





### 3-0-0

## SYNTHESIS



3-1-0

**Quality in Numbers**

For structuralism, according to Deleuze, there is always an over-production of meaning, caused by a superfluency of combinations between structural elements.

*'For every sensible line of straightforward statement in the books there are leagues of senseless cacophonies, verbal jumbles and incoherence. Nonsense is normal in the Library. The reasonable (and even humble and pure coherence) is an almost miraculous exception'.<sup>9</sup>*

In Jorge Luis Borges 'Library of Babel'<sup>10</sup>, a library of all possible books of all time is laid out in a three dimensional arrangement of hexagonal rooms and walkways. Building upon Borges' vision, Kevin Kelly speculates on a navigation and classification system which allows an individual to find a book of some coherence, or in fact any book one wishes to find. He proposes a system of approximation, on the assumption that there be an order of sorts within the library, that similar sequences of jumbled vowels and consonants be arranged next to each others.

While Borges uses the description of the Universe as a highly complex, built edifice to state the necessity of a god creator of sorts, Kevin Kelly uses this presumption of an inner logic to tell an evolutionary tale of finding rather than creating, coding, classification and navigation.

Similarly, our gateway's library of narrative pattern is an evolutionary tale of wasteful ruthlessness, collecting, turning over and discarding-or-not the banal and trivial, planned and grown. By abusing and appropriating the local narrative, we are synthesising grain and gravitas, intrigue and complexity. By embracing and deconstructing nostalgia, facing the ritual, symbolic, quasi-religious we aim to find and de-code building as spatial consequence.

3-2-0

**Wittgenstein Oneandahalf**

Ludwig Wittgenstein's house for his sister is chronologically sandwiched between his early and late philosophy and referred to in architectural as well as philosophical literature as built expression of his early 'Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus'; Hermine Wittgenstein, Ludwig's sister, calls it 'hausgewordene Logik' (logic turned house) and 'a house for the gods'. Lothar Rentschler, however, speaks of 'homomorphous structural analogies' between the Tractatus and the house, a concept which, together with material analogies, forms the basis for many of the Gateway projects.

While Wittgenstein 1 is dealing with 'a systematic, abstract, ideal concept of thinking, language, the world in general', Wittgenstein's later work deals with language in a non-systematic and empirical way.

Ian Turnovsky, now, uses an alcove detail in the breakfast room as vehicle to expand on these two opposing philosophical strands within the same mind, on the one hand, but also and in reverse, to investigate the building as the place where empirical, material, structural constraints of the world impede upon the ideal concept of the pure form. He reflects upon the struggle between the architectural intention as systemic, abstract, ideal concept, and the harsh empiricism of physical production and making.

Most importantly for our work, he also opens up fertile narrative ground for the studio, by focussing on Wittgenstein's relative dilettantism in the development of architectural detail, a fact which is seen as reason for the obvious struggle within the house plan.

Turnovsky lifts the biographical and pathological into the discipline of analysing building; he focuses on Wittgenstein's obsession and relentlessness which finds its expression in the detail and precision of pieces of equipment and furniture: radiators, door locks and handles. Furthermore, he offers the literary concept of the poetic as signifier for our reading of context: poetic, he states, implies that the 'connotative and associative spectrum of meaning' are not ignored.

Biography, as for Braudel, 'becomes the basic framework of analysis, irrespective of the complexity of the subject matter. Tracing back the etymological roots of the term 'poiesis', making becomes our vehicle for synthesis, brief development, design. The arch spanning text, structure and patterns of usage is closed to a circle by Umberto Eco's use of the word poetic as 'form-and structure of the artefact, or as operative programme of the artist.



### 3-0-1

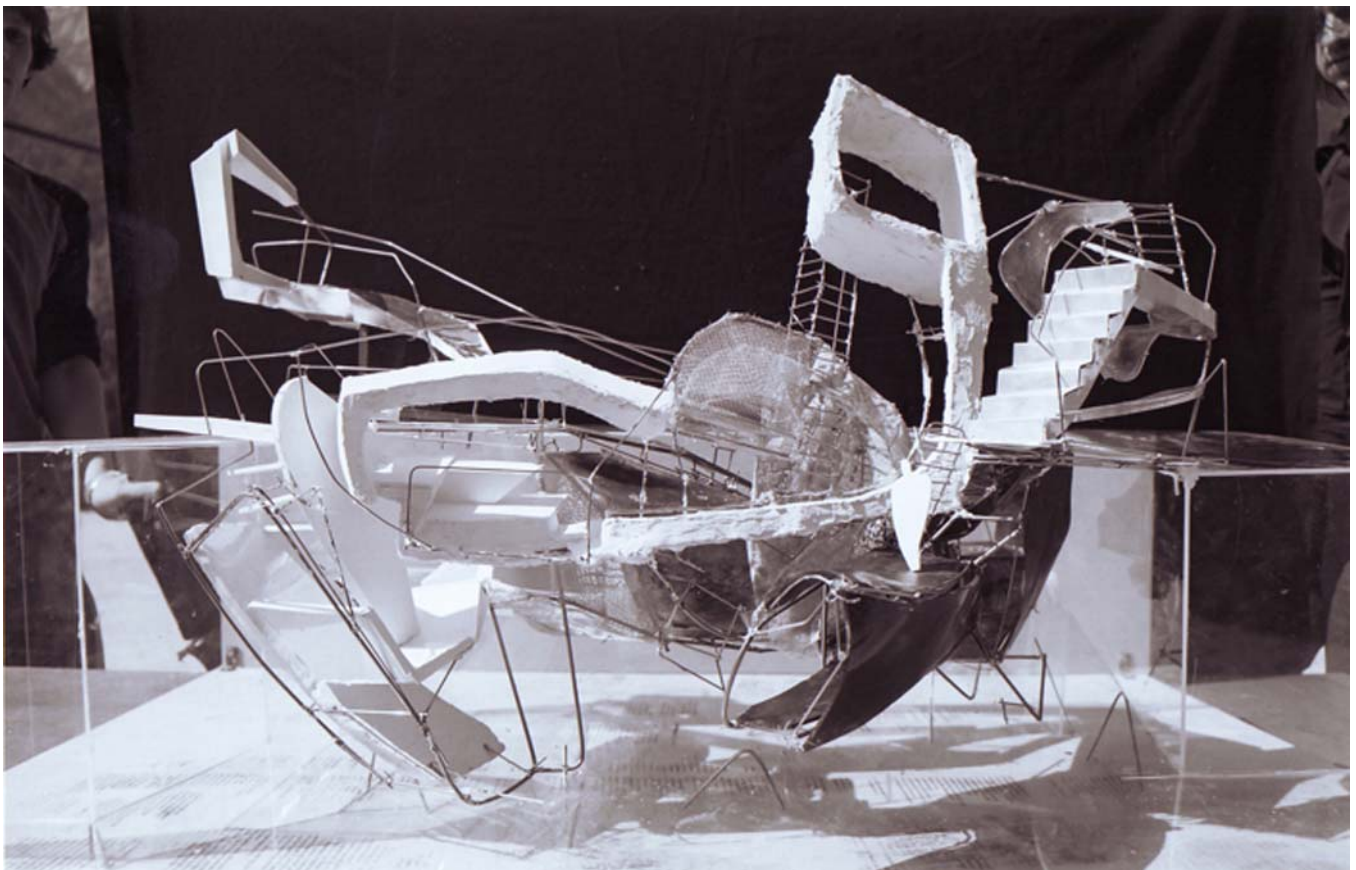
#### THEATRE OF THE EVERYDAY

The Theatre of Everyday Life utilises the architectural, historic, event to establish a theatre of intensities, with temporary, oscillating and recurring fragments, synchronised with text, and Brechtian techniques of repetition and exaggeration; comically self referential, utopian and aggressively meaningless.

Theatre is a representational tool for a supercharged or superstarted synthesis.

Asja Lacis was the engineer who drove the straight line through Walter Benjamin the collector of text but travelled with Brecht to structure the playful text.

The theatre of the river; silt, water and marine life is collected and separated by the Mudlarks and it is distributed as a rich display of collection and analysis by the Punch Drunk Theatre Company . Science laboratory becomes theatre. Faust is wandering in the background being watched by Iain Sinclair. These are Stage sets for the collecting display and performance of objects. Collecting construction and spatial structure and objects emerging from the Thames



*Fig.7: Theatre of the Everyday – Christoph Eppacher 2004*





### 3-0-3 BIG KNUCKLES MANIPULATOR

Material façade – Game 9, Patrick Lewis 2005. In the scaffolding and fabric of the brownfield construction site, Big knuckles Bennett, East End operator, and sometime coppersmith, is manipulating. This is the façade and front for 580, ‘buy off plan’, units at River View. Terry is, is making with a twist, working with Stella, the digital copy queen, on the plans. ‘On your bike’ Larry the locksmith, the man with the golden ear, is checking his tools. It’s time to choreograph the big one. A very large gem, a JCB, and a fast boat to the North Kent Marshes, then stone stitched into an inner lining, is anyone listening in. A highly intricate project: a peninsula car crash; Amy Johnson’s disappearance in the Thames and Venice as a façade construct, and he also started to craftily fabricate the story of an architecture of illusion where billboard and scaffold is building. The clues to the content are sewn into pockets; magnifying lenses to copy intricate detail: a catalogue of keys. All protected by flattened ‘continental’ copper welts.



*Fig.9: Big Knuckles Manipulator – Patrick Lewis 2004*

4-0-0

## SUMMARY

By playing the structure of the paper against a series of projects sited within the larger confines of the Gateway, this paper is trying to describe the interface between the humanities and architecture by offering a number of parallel avenues: in chapter 2, our understanding of narrative and structure; appropriateness of a certain way of reading history, leading to a particular general perception of the studied field of context and knowledge; from there, our suggested reading of the presented examples of work, and their place within the symbolic ordering of the Gateway. This undertaking is continued and made explicit in part 3, which looks at the contextual placing and questions of relevance and status, classification and the generative potential of the approach, and finally defines the material, the making, the process of physical production to be the discipline that defines the outcome. As for the Humanities, read words, narrative and theatrical guides. The play with mathematics, controlling the ordering devices.

In all this, one could be more explicit, less suggestive. More dogmatic, manifesto-like. The work, and writing about it, is reflective in the sense of producing and defining meaning through description and structural manipulation; open-ended, also, descriptive, inconclusive.

Horizontal analysis of the Thames Gateway then, deploying structural games to manipulate inner order and narrative. The game becomes the masterplan, analysis becomes synthesis. Growing history, searching for soul.

Proposals, projects and thinking are contextual in their search for local narrative and structure. By tackling the Gateway's complexity and vastness through analysis of the minute, the local, the often quirky and peculiar, they aim to synthesise architectural responses to contextual and narrative fields of varying intensities. Architecture marking the land, playing within and contributing to a particular kind of local intellectual context.

-end

*Notes:*

- 1 Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, (London: Penguin Classic 1996) p17
- 2 Peter Hall, *London 2000*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1963)
- 3 Georges Perec, *Life, A User's Manual*, Translated by David Bellos, (London: Godine 2000)
- 4 Ferdinand De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983)
- 5 Deleuze, *Woran erkennt man den Strukturalismus?* (Berlin: Merve Verlag, 1992), translation by the author
- 6 John Lechte, *Fifty key contemporary thinkers: from structuralism to post-modernity* (London: Routledge, 1994), from Roger Chartier, *Cultural History. Between Practices and Representations*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p.61
- 7 Gilles Deleuze, *Woran erkennt man den Strukturalismus?* (Berlin: Merve Verlag, 1992) translation by the author
- 8 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Sian Reynolds (Glasgow: William Collins, 1972)
- 9 Kevin Kelly, *Out Of Control: The New Biology of Machines* (London: Fourth Estate, 1994)
- 10 Jorge Luis Borges, *Im Labyrinth* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003), from *Fiktionen*, 1992, trans. Karl August Horst and Gisbert Haefs